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THE RHETORIC OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND EAST TIMOR

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I would like to dedicate this paper to the students, both Timorese and Portuguese, of the intensive English course which I taught during the Easter holidays this spring, and which was without a doubt one of the most rewarding experiences in my entire career as a teacher.

Like most Americans, until recently I knew very little about Timor. My contacts with Timor and the Timorese cause began when I was asked by Professor Barbedo de Magalhaes to translate the book East Timor: Land of Hope, which was in fact an enlarged version of the Proceedings of a previous session of the Symposium on Timor. One of the advantages of being a translator is that one learns from the texts one translates, and this was certainly true in my case: I learned a great deal from the "Introduction", a concise and lucid account of the history of East Timor to the present day, and especially from the words of the Timorese themselves. The eloquent simplicity of their essays describing the unspeakable--torture, arbitrary arrests, a school invaded by army troops and the children fleeing in panic before the soldiers--moved me very deeply. What was especially difficult for me as a person born in the United States of America was the realization that my country, which was built on the premise that all human beings have the inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, had not only countenanced but actively supported with money, weapons, and international political clout an invasion which had directly deprived the East Timorese the right to life and liberty. Whether the Timorese are happy or not under the Indonesian occupiers, only they themselves can say: from what my Timorese students tell me, I would rather doubt it. Seeing one's friends and relatives shot, or being imprisoned or raped by Indonesian troops, would not exactly seem to be the best way to pursue happiness.

Perhaps one of the curses of the academic mind is that one is always prompted to seek the reasons underlying what would seem to be beyond the realm of the rational. As I have taught American history and culture to Portuguese students at the University of Oporto for the last fifteen years,
I felt that this paper might be an occasion to examine the historical factors which have contributed to the gap between American rhetoric--the lofty and noble aims of equality and self-determination--and American praxis--the idea that the end (the economic well-being of the United States of America) justifies the means (active financial and military assistance to a corrupt totalitarian regime).

From its very beginnings, America has felt a certain ambivalence about its role in the world. This ambivalence was present in the first European colonizers of what would later become the United States, most particularly in the English Puritan settlers. When reading documents produced by Puritan figures such as William Bradford and John Winthrop, one is impressed by the firmness of purpose and the rhetorical power of Puritan discourse. Men such as Bradford and Winthrop were faced in the seventeenth century with a formidable challenge: how to weld a colony of religions malcontents and convicted felons into a cohesive, productive community? How could the Puritans, as emigrants from Europe, justify their decision to leave the Old World and at the same time conserve the European traits which

would prevent them from descending into what they perceived as the savagery of America's Native populations?

The answer to these questions emerged in the Puritan myth of the City on a Hill. This extraordinarily vivid metaphor--that of America as a luminous city atop a mountain, a shining example to all the world--proved immensely powerful in channeling the energies of Puritan citizens to build a community in the American wilderness. The City on the Hill is simply the Puritan application of utopian theory to the task of constructing a viable society on the American continent. For this purpose, the Puritans appropriated Biblical rhetoric and applied it to their own concrete historical situation. In this perspective, the Puritans were analogous to the Israelites, the chosen people of God, and Puritans leaders such as Winthrop were seen as the heirs of Moses, leading their people from captivity under the perfidious British (whose Biblical equivalent would be the Egyptian Pharaoh). Thus America was seen as the Promised Land, the New Israel, a sacred place where God's will would be made manifest by the actions of the Puritans, his chosen people, in building a perfect society on this earth and not in the hereafter.

Obviously, there are some contradictions present in this sort of rhetoric. One of the most important ones was linked with Puritan attitudes to worldly riches: how could one reconcile earthly prosperity with salvation in the world to come? John Winthrop's Journal is full of episodes which reveal the difficulties which the Puritans encountered in reconciling these contradictions. Fortunately (for the Puritans, if not for the Native populations of what would later become the United States), the answer was found in the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. The argument, in extremely simplified form, went as follows: if some souls were elected from the very beginning for salvation, it was only logical that their elect status would be made manifest in their earthly prosperity. Thus, to accumulate wealth was not a token of greed or avarice, but rather --to the Puritans--a sign of divine love and approval which legitimized their secular undertakings. In order to amass wealth and further the Puritan version of the ideal community, any means were legitimate, including direct violence against the peoples and the landscape of the New Continent. One of the most notorious examples of this sort of attitude is William Bradford's oft-quoted remark about the burning of an Pequot village: "It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fire and the streams of blood quenching the same, and horrible was the stink and scent thereof; but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and they gave the praise thereof to God, who had wrought so wonderfully for them..." In this attack, more than 400 Pequot Indians were killed. It would seem that the Puritan rhetoric of mission could be invoked to condone and legitimize unlimited violence against non-European peoples. This concept became increasingly secularized throughout the eighteenth century, but its essential elements remained constant and would become the foundation of American exceptionalist thought: that of the colonization and development of America as a God-given mission not only to construct the perfect society but also to expand the benefits of republican government and a free-market economy to less fortunate peoples.

In the nineteenth century, one of the chief expressions of exceptionalist discourse was that of Manifest Destiny. This doctrine, propounded in 1839 by John O'Sullivan in support of American intervention in Mexico, is a recylcled secular version of the City on the Hill, in which America is viewed as "the Great Nation of Futurity." In O'Sullivan's own words, "...we are the nation of progress, of individual freedom, of universal enfranchisement". (at the time women, blacks and Indians could not vote.) He continues: "This is our highest destiny, and in nature's eternal, inevitable decree of cause and effect we must accomplish it...For this blessed mission to the nations of the world, which are shut out from the life-giving light of truth, has America been chosen." O'Sullivan was in fact pro-slavery, and the underlying

purpose of this lofty rhetoric was to encourage America to appropriate Texas, then a part of Mexico and a leading producer of raw cotton, so that it could then enter the Union as a slave state. Once again, the idea of America's Divine Mission was invoked in protection of an institution--in this case, slavery--which directly contradicted the principles on which the country was founded.

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny was later the basis for the settlement of the West and for the near extermination of the Native tribes who lived there. When Western settlement was complete and when the land frontier had finally vanished, a watershed had been reached. What emerged to replace the concept of the land frontier as the central metaphor which would galvanize and channel American energies was that of the urban/industrial frontier. In this perspective, America would continue to build the perfect society by implementing the rational rectilinear values of industrialism. This led inevitably in the twentieth century to overseas expansion, in which America felt that its mission was to make the world "safe" for democracy and free trade, and which legitimized the use of force (as in the annexation of the Panama Canal) to protect America's business interests.

And this leads us to Timor. In the period following World War II, the makers of American foreign policy saw the world situation in Manichaeistic fashion as a struggle between the forces of Evil (that is, the former Eastern bloc countries) and of Good (the West, led by the United States). In this context, the situation existing in Southeast Asia was indeed alarming. According to the Domino Theory, if one country were allowed to become Communist, others would follow in quick succession. The collapse of South Vietnam and the ignominious scenes of Americans and Vietnamese fleeing from the roof of the American Embassy in Saigon in 1975 seemed to many to be the confirmation of this sort of thinking. Thus the appearance of a pro-independence movement in Timor was greeted with alarm and not a little paranoia at the idea of a leftist regime with access to the vast undersea oilfields in the Sea of Timor.

In order to suppress what was viewed as a leftist insurrection inimical to American economic interests, America gave its tacit approval to the Indonesian invasion. In a visit with General Suharto on the eve of the invasion, President Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger reassured the Indonesian leader that arms shipments to his country would not be affected by such an initiative. On the contrary, arms shipments to Indonesia the following year increased by more than 100%. In 1976 America shipped OV-10 Bronco aircraft as well as napalm and other sophisticated weapons to the Indonesian Armed Forces, which would be used in the following years against Timorese civilians with deadly effectiveness.

In a document produced by the Institute for Policy Studies in 1982, Flora E. Montealegre has examined the nature of American relations with the Indonesian regime. She observes that Indonesia is "rich in high quality petroleum products and provides 6% of U. S. oil imports. It is also a major supplier of tin, rubber, cotton and wood, and an important market for U. S. goods and services. And since 1965, Indonesia has become a paradies for multinational corporations." Thus American trade interests, together with the Domino Theory, led the United States to shut its eyes to the horrors committed in Timor after 1975. Once again, we encounter the rhetoric of mission: the destruction of a tribal, communitarian society is perceived by America as carrying out its divinely mandated mission to make the world safe for a liberal free-market economy. In this perspective, the fact that more than 200,000 Timorese died in the process is seen as a mere statistic.

In recent years, this sort of thought has become increasingly outmoded and difficult to sustain. The turning point was, most definitely, due to the massacre in the Santa Cruz cemetery, and the powerful documentary film made of this event proved beyond the shadow of a doubt the old adage that an image is worth a thousand words. For most Americans, to realize that American taxes very probably paid for the bullets fired against innocent civilians is morally repugnant, but to actually see this taking place before our very eyes comes as a tremendous shock. In recent months, some encouraging steps have been taken, such as cutting off the training of Indonesian military officers in the U. S. During the recent Tokyo summit of the Group of Seven, President Clinton is said to have raised the issue of human rights violations in Timor with General Suharto. Whether this will have any practical effects remains to be seen.

Representative Tony Hall, sponsor of legislation to terminate all U. S. bilateral assistance to Indonesia, has remarked: "It is insufficient to beg the Indonesians repeatedly to treat the Timorese with basic human decency...This is like condoning slavery, but asking the slave driver to spare the whip. Attention must be focused on getting the Indonesians to withdraw from East Timor and allow the Timorese to participate in a referendum on self-determination." It seems to me that Hall is right on target. Perhaps it shows considerable naivete on my part, but I am convinced that Americans will one day realize that self-determination for East Timor is not only in the best interest of the Timorese, but also of the Indonesians (as is evidenced by the widespread dissent on this issue within Indonesia itself) and of Americans as well. It is obviously legitimate for the United States to defend its own economic interests, but never at the cost of betraying the basic principles of freedom and human decency on which America itself is based.